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Miller on energy, health care, pace of reform

By Mark Binker

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One might think these would be halcyon days, at least politically, for Rep. Brad Miller, a Raleigh Democrat who represents parts of Guilford and Rockingham counties in Congress.

A member of his party is in the White House, Democrats control the House and Senate, and one of his signature issues — financial services regulation — is on the political front-burner.

But don't expect any glowing reviews of political progress in Washington from Miller.

"I'm frustrated," Miller said Monday as he lent his voice to a clean-energy event on N.C. State's campus. Officials from the university and Duke Energy touted efforts to build a "smart" utility grid and homes that could generate their own power and monitor appliances for wasted electricity.

That's just the kind of thing an energy bill that just passed the House would encourage. It awaits Senate action.

For Miller, the waiting is the hardest part on a whole lot of fronts.

"I'm frustrated with how hard it is to get things through," Miller said. "I'm frustrated with how much influence, how much power, some of the industries that should be completely discredited still have."

He said that feeling is most acute when it comes to financial services, where he has been pushing consumer protection measures and tighter regulations on the financial markets. The U.S. economy, he said, is still feeling the fallout from problems in those industries. "Other than the credit card bill, we haven't seen much that's gotten all the way through and been signed," he said.

So what did he expect?

"I had hoped for more of a hundred days kind of public support; that given where the economy was, given how much how had gone wrong, that there would be a strong force behind some pretty fundamental reform," Miller said. "Certainly, getting consumer protection through is a knife fight."

ON THE ISSUES

Watch asked Miller about three issues that are hot items in Congress right now:

On the energy bill: The Raleigh Democrat said you can make the case for the bill even if you discount any notion of climate change.

"Even without that, we're going to run out of the stuff. We're going to run out of the cheap abundant fuel," Miller said. "We need to be developing it and we need to move it into commercial use."

Worth noting: The energy bill has passed the House but is awaiting action in the Senate, where Miller and Congressman David Price, a Chapel Hill Democrat, said Monday they expected to see changes.

On financial services regulation: Miller says the idea of an overall consumer protection regulation for the mortgage and banking sector is making progress, despite pushback from the banking industry. He said the new agency should take pieces of powers now in the hands of separate regulators and consolidate them.

"(It's) really not a lot of new powers, but just taking powers and giving them to someone whose principal job it will be to protect consumers," Miller said. "Giving those powers to someone who will actually use those powers will be an enormous change."

On health care: Miller said he isn't directly involved in shaping that bill — financial regulation is enough to keep him busy. But he hopes whatever is finally produced will require insurers offer a basic level of coverage to everyone who buys health insurance.

"A standard benefits package really would provide a common understanding of what health insurance pays for and what it doesn't. So you don't figure out what kind of health insurance you've really got only when somebody in your family really gets sick. That would be a huge help over the system we've got now," Miller said.

"It's not just comparison shop. It's so you don't spend two days in voicemail hell if your doctor tells you need treatment trying to get your health insurance to pay for it," Miller said.

SPEAKING OF HEALTH CARE

Columns in this space over the past couple months have discussed health-care reform and particularly Sen. Kay Hagan's role on the Senate Health Education Labor and Pensions Committee. Hagan, a Greensboro Democrat, says she is happy with the version of the bill her committee produced. Meanwhile, the House is producing its own health care bills.

Local Republicans don't think much of those efforts.

Sen. Richard Burr had this to say about the bill that passed Hagan's committee:

"Not only does the bill that was passed out of the HELP committee today fall 34 million Americans short of full coverage, it is unsustainable financially," the Winston-Salem Republican said during a news conference. "And it actually will penalize Americans that have insurance today that they are happy with and doctors they want to go to, that will affect them in the future on the cost of their health care and possibly on who their provider of choice might be. We are headed in the wrong direction."

Meanwhile, Rep. Virginia Foxx is unhappy with the House version of the health-care bill, or at least the process used to create it.

"Americans' health care is much too important for Congress to pass legislation in a blind rush or under the cloak of secrecy," Foxx, a Winston-Salem Republican, said in a news release. "I promise that I will not support any legislation that the American people have not had an opportunity to review and weigh in on. "I also promise that under no circumstances will I vote for a bill that does not specifically forbid taxpayer-funded abortion or that mandates insurance coverage of abortion. Taxpayer-funded abortion is a profound offense to the conscience of millions and millions of Americans, and such policies have no place in a health care reform bill."